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SUBJECT: Comoros Tense Ahead Of May 17 Referendum

REF: ANTAN 285

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: President Sambi's Union Government is actively campaigning for a constitutional referendum that would concentrate power in the central government, weaken island autonomy, and open the possibility that he could remain in office beyond the May, 2010 end of his term. Opposition leaders lodged an official complaint at the Constitutional Court, vow to prevent the vote from taking place, and will refuse to accept the outcome of what they call an "illegal" referendum. END SUMMARY.
Constitutional Revisions
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12. (SBU) President Sambi published his constitutional revisions to be considered for the May 17 referendum (in French and not as a part of the complete constitutional text - thus mostly indecipherable for Comorans and foreigners alike). If approved, the referendum reduces island "presidents" to "governors" and strips them of most of their autonomy. Local administrative responsibilities are delineated for the islands, with a clause that "any authorities not explicitly listed are the purview of the Union government." A third vice president position would be created, resulting in one for each island to be responsible for implementing Union policy on their home island. The vice presidents would have the powers and budget authority to replace the island presidents in most of their existing roles (and all of the profitable ones). The draft also requires a "congress of parliaments" (the National Assembly and island assemblies) to meet to decide on a date for the next Union Presidential election and requires this be harmonized with votes for the island executives. Given all four parliaments are already or soon-to-be defunct, their scheduled elections having not been held, such a congress would be unlikely to take place in the near future - and certainly not in time to decide that President Sambi should be replaced via an election at the end of his current mandate in May, 12010.

Opposition Turns To The Court
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13. (SBU) Opposition leader and Grande Comore island president Abdouwahabi filed an official legal complaint against the referendum at the Constitutional Court May 4. In a subsequent statement he argued that President Sambi's proposed changes to the constitution - most notably to delay the rotating presidency and eliminate island autonomy - are "untouchable" foundations of Comoros' basic law. Referring to the Union's published draft revisions, Abdouwahabi said President Sambi would "reduce the islands to the level of mere municipalities and take all power in the Union in violation of the Fomboni and Beit-Salaam Accords." He and other opposition leaders from all three islands have announced a series of rallies in the coming days to call for a boycott of the referendum.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: One of President Sambi's personal advisors recently told the Comoros Officer that he is being misled by his cabinet to believe his referendum is necessary and uncontroversial. The President seems genuinely well-intentioned but politically naove and increasingly detached from Comoran reality -- not surprising when he is out of the country half the time. His referendum

violates the spirit (if not the letter) of the Fomboni and Beit-Salaam reconciliation agreements by essentially ending island autonomy and delaying Moheli's turn in the rotating presidency. While it may be more efficient for a country of fewer than one million people to have a centralized government, Comoran history suggests that the people are from their islands first and from the Comoros second - and that they will refuse to be controlled from across the water. Opposition leaders appear certain to contest what they see as Sambi's power-grab up to and beyond May 17. END COMMENT.

MARQUARDT